



Area event celebrates Juneteenth

By Zach Ahmad
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When 14-year-old Starling Staton saw an elderly man in a red sport coat Saturday while walking through Tom Stith Park, he did a double take.

Weeks earlier, he had seen a documentary on the Tuskegee Airmen, the distinguished group of black fighter pilots who flew during World War II. The man's dress looked suspiciously like what the living members of the group wore during the film.



Telegram photo / Alan Campbell

Members of the Greater N.C. Chapter of the Ninth and Tenth Horse Cavalry Association of the Buffalo Soldiers ride Saturday on Virginia Street for the Juneteenth celebration.

As it turns out, he wasn't far off. The man in the red coat was Leonard Hunter, spokesman for the Wilson V. Eagleson Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen.

Staton, who hopes to one day be a pilot, approached Hunter and shook his hand. "I was proud to meet one of them," Staton said. "I didn't even know some of them were still around."

traveling to events across the country to teach others about the group's role in black history.

Hunter was in Rocky Mount on Saturday for the city's second annual Juneteenth celebration, an event that commemorates the announcement of slavery's abolition in Texas in 1865 and is celebrated across the country.

Hunter said the holiday is an important marker in black history, and he wanted to do his part to spread that message.

"It is extremely important," Hunter said. "It is important that everyone understand the freedoms that we take for granted and how we got those freedoms."

Technically, Hunter, 71, isn't one of the original Tuskegee Airmen. But since joining the group's national foundation more than a decade ago, he has become one of its pre-eminent historians,

The Tuskegee Airmen weren't the only attraction at the Juneteenth celebration. The day started out with a parade and featured musical performances and speakers throughout the day, including representatives from the Buffalo Soldiers.

With the celebration in its second year, Sauuda Eshe, one of the event planners on the Juneteenth Planning Committee, said the event was intended to give more people in Rocky Mount – black and white – a sense of the holiday's meaning.

"It really is part of American history," Eshe said. "Because Rocky Mount didn't have a Juneteenth celebration, we felt it was time to catch up with the rest of the country."